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This issue of Thresholds *examines the interaction between art, architecture, and recent advances in electronic technology. In two interviews with faculty members, divergent aspects of this encounter are explored: Mitchell presents ideas concerning architectural representation and the nature of architectural knowledge in relation to the logic of computation. Conversely, Wodiczko explores issues of immigration, community, and self-representation through the medium of an electronic "vehicle." Daniel's project for* Thresholds, *an electromechanical video and sound sculpture, is inspired by her reading of chaos theory. Student projects and essays further debate these views: Ehrlich pushes the psycho-sexual conceptual limits of 'self' within the discourse of cyberspace; Kincaid contests the role of computation in the production of architectural knowledge, and Orth explores representations of the body - 'synthetic' and 'organic' - under the gaze of video technology.*

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CYBORGASM: A LOVE LETTER

by Matthew Erlich

"To pronounce a perfect paradox is never to hear it deteriorate into doxa."

"If it were possible to imagine an aesthetic of textual pleasure, it would have to include: writing aloud... it is carried... by the grain of the voice, which is an erotic mixture of timbre and language... its aim is not the clarity of messages, the theater of emotions, what it searches for (in a perspective of jouissance) are the pulsional incidents." -Roland Barthes

[The following are excerpts from a love letter sent over the net to an unknown object of desire. The gender and even the humanity of the beloved are in doubt; artificially intelligent agents have been known to behave like humans over the net, even to attract (and not discourage) amorous approaches. The letter was an attempt to draw the beloved out of the closet, so to speak. It took place in the context of post-telecoital conversation.]

We are, after all, in the business of packaging for export. But insofar as presence is only a sending, or, in Heidegger's warning, that the sending is a giving that gives all of itself in its gift, exhausts itself, and yet giving itself is withheld, coming never comes. Presence itself is impossible, present only as trace, as signifying its own absence. Cyberspace exacerbates this. Telepresence, and especially teledildonics, in Sandy Stone's phrase, is a field with a tautological name.1 All presence is telepresence. And even in 'actual sex,' which itself is virtual in psychoanalytic reasoning, coming never comes. Are we present at the moment of our own orgasm? Or is it a petit mort, a little death, that assures us that we will never be present at the moment of our own death, at the moment of our own orgasm. Was it as good for you as it was for me? Can I ever know if it was? Can I actually know if it was as good for me as it was for me? We can endlessly recuperate orgasm and death without ever coming close to coming, and without ever coming close to being present at our own death. Or is that what cyberspace is all about? The impossible coexistence of immortality and embodiment. Maybe we can be present at our own orgasm. We can be present at somebody else's. So my question then is, were you present at my orgasm? Was I present at yours? Did we really come together? Even for a moment? Or did I just come apart?

"Can you think what I feel? Can you feel what I think?" Alan Turing asked his young lover Arnold in 1951. He was trying to explain portions of a theory of a Turing machine to the young working class boy, unfamiliar with the language of mathematics. Or was he asking about the communicability of orgasm, of pleasure, of bliss, of the erasure of the subject, when one subject was terribly privileged to begin with, and another had little privilege of subjectivity at all? Does the annihilation of subjectivity in orgasm mean a temporary union in a no-space, perhaps even the no-space of cyberspace, for two lovers so disparate as Alan Turing and Arnold Murray, or as you and I? He imagined, for Arnold's and the story's sake, that the machine had captured him and would not release him (in a hangar, or was it a closet?); made him compete with the computer for his freedom. And Turing told Arnold that he had figured out how to triumph over the machine: by doing arithmetic so badly and slowly and stupidly that it would commit suicide in despair. Turing himself committed suicide in despair a few years later. Reporting a burglary, a burglary much like Case's in Neuromancer, from the inside perhaps (involving a friend of Arnold's, a former lover of Alan's), Turing lied about his sexuality, and then, caught in what the lie had led him to, confessed too much. A five page statement, in fact. A biographer, Andrew Hodges, puts it this way,

> Relieved of the usual necessity to translate human life into police language, [the detectives] were most appreciative of what was 'a lovely statement,' written in 'a flowing style, almost like prose,' although 'beyond them in some of its phraseology.' They were particularly impressed by his absence of shame. 'He was a real convert... he really believed he was doing the right thing.' [But] as a sex criminal [Turing didn't realize] he had forfeited the protection of the law. Alan's statement illustrated the difficulty he faced in grasping this fundamental fact. It was mostly concerned with the undecidable problem of Arnold's veracity, and details of the 'offence,' though freely and even defiantly supplied, appeared as incidental to what he perceived as the story. It might be called unrealistic of him to expect a relationship rooted in such inequality to develop as an 'affair' between free individuals, he took no account of the fact that words and actions could mean different things to people in different social circumstances... the greater unreality lay in Alan's attitude to the law, which was not interested in his mental dilemmas, but was very much concerned with his bodily activities.[2]

It started from the love of the body of the text... Turing's beautifully written and necessary confession. He spoke prose without knowing it. His revelation of the truth of his body through the body of the text, which of course, was in context, concerned with other things entirely. A preoccupation with the undecidable question of moral and social difference. The erasure of that difference through orgasm. But it was only the orgasm itself, and not its relation to subjectivity and truth that concerned the police. These police, Turing's police, so far from Gibson's Turing Police, are only concerned with the reality, the literalness of the meaning of the body of the text, the literal union of two subjects, no, two bodies, not at all

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cover photo by György Kepes, 1949

Photo by Taylor Galyean

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DISSONANT IDENTITIES:

A Conversation between Krzysztof Wodiczko and Juli Carson

Your recent work has investigated issues of immigrant subjectivity and identity, simultaneously utilizing and questioning their production within paradigms of technology. Let's begin by discussing one of your latest projects *Alien Staff*.

It is an instrument-symbol meant to be used by an immigrant as a speech act tool or a psycho-performative aid. Purposely designed to look like an attribute-cliché of a wanderer, it visually recalls a shepherd's staff, magic wand, or ceremonial speaking stick. The owner of the staff appears to be one with a long history of wanderers, the tradition itself being a cliché, but it is a cliché used here strategically. The immigrant, as operator of this respected cliché, thus draws the attention of distant and distracted passersby. The strangely familiar shape of the staff allures the "non-stranger" to come closer to the operator/storyteller.

Upon closer examination the "non-stranger" discovers a tiny video monitor inserted in the head or mouth of the staff's crook section and recognizes the recorded image to be that of the operator's face. Once this contact has been made, one cannot dismiss the effect of the *doubling*: a space is created *in-between* the operator and passerby, and consequently between representation and "actual" presence, between actor and character. Usually when we look at the image of a speaker on our TV screens at home, we don't see the "actual" person speaking behind the image. This confrontation, facilitated by the operator and his or her staff, is therefore unexpected, the story told by the staff's operator is interrupted and even contradicted by the pre-recorded image which tells other stories and vice-versa. The image on the monitor screen may show the operator recounting a tragic or comic moment concerning his or her alien status, however, the operator who holds the staff, thus relieved from the burden of telling this story, presents another face. Standing next to his or her own history, the operator asks the viewer, who now appears to be the stranger, to tell their own story. At this point a new space is created by the operator/object in relation to the spectator. The distinction between stranger and non-stranger is problematized here - maybe around this staff everyone becomes a different kind of stranger. In the staff's mid section a container displays other images (actual objects, relics, talisman) that correspond to the story told on the screen, but being ambiguous in themselves, they require the operator's story to convey meaning to the spectator, as if the spectator were now the "stranger."

Can you describe here, so as to give the performative act a context, who the operators are, and in what space this act is performed?

From many respondents, five aliens, all members of large populations that have crossed the French border, chose to operate the staff. From the compilation of each immigrant's story, told individually to our video crew, a shock or a kind of sickness results. This is what Kristeva calls the "symptom" of being an immigrant for which no metaphor, language, or community - and therefore ultimately no representation - exists. It is not the point here to imagine a solution to this dilemma, but the issue is that these recording sessions were perhaps the first time they experienced the impossible task of putting together the facts of their life in an attempt to create some meaningful representation of it. Along with the anger and frustration accompanying the aliens' stories, certain positive aspects of liberation from one's "real" identity, community, and heritage became apparent: the closeness, the family and community ties, the identity that one loves, are all now questionable. What the crew did after taping and transcribing the stories, was to put together fragments from the different sessions, creating a montage, a complex, synthetic pastiche. The results were the unfinished and incomplete thoughts and sentences they had enunciated and the opening up of a description that is not an explanation.

Having talked about the operator as subject, what happens to him or her in the public realm in which he or she is also spectacle? Which is to say, how does the operator of the staff, within the montage of the real and the televised, serve to undermine the totality of the international alien identity? This undermining resonates with Kristeva's assertions in *Strangers to Ourselves* that concomitant to nationalism is an abject alien identity upon which the production/stabilization of nationalism relies. One thus needs to disrupt the normalization of nationalism in order to challenge the sheer abjection of its dialectic counterpart - foreignness.

Yes this is true. And had the project ended merely with the making of the video, it would have ended as art therapy; namely, the recording and concretization of self. It nonetheless may have been beneficial because at that moment there is some consolation. However, when the video is completed, it is not relinquished to be played by whomever acquires the tape; it remains in the immigrant's own hands to manipulate as he or she chooses. Played in the staff's monitor which is held by the operator's side, it functions as supplementary material to the story the alien tells in public to passersby, much the way projected slides function for the lecturer.

But does the staff destabilize foreignness, the alien's "public" otherness?

The staff releases the alien from the responsibility of constantly having to repeat her or himself in an effort to explain things. Now there are two images, two strangers.

And they don't always agree, so there is a certain amount of discord, which in itself resists the production of a reified foreign, and thus "national," face again.

Yes, it is a different kind of representation than the one you see in newspapers. That image, we already know. But this new image, in the closeness of a public crowd, projects a different face

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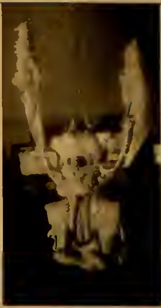
SKIN FLICKS

My video tapes are representations of my body that I have made. I don't think it is necessary to point out the relationship of my videos to porno films. Nor, of the surveillance camera to the pornographer's eye. The action in my tapes, however, is quite different. As I make the skins I cover my body. I deny the camera the possibility of seeing my actual skin, by covering it with an artificial one. In some ways, this skin protects from observation while exposing me to certain messages. The camera gets a glimpse of a new self when the skins are removed. Ultimately an unconstructed self.

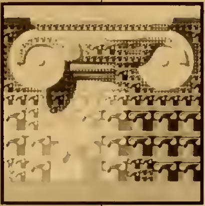
- Margaret Orth



Left to right
Fortune Skin
Psychic Phone Skin

COMPUTERS AND ARCHITECTURE: present and future, reality and utopia

An Interview with William Mitchell
by José Pinto Duarte



The following article is a slightly modified version of an interview which first appeared in Architecti, a Portuguese periodical.

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How would you describe the evolution of computer applications in the field of architecture and how is it connected to the evolution of computer capabilities in general?

We have seen, for several decades now, and we will probably continue to see for a few decades more, continued enormous increases in computing power, and drops in the costs of computing. This has meant that at a very rapid pace more and more ambitious things became possible. Take for example something like producing ray-traced images of architectural environments. Even four or five years ago, that was a very difficult thing to do. Now it is commonplace because we have more computing power available. In the last few decades, the whole field of software development has been invented and gone through an enormous evolution, from something rather simple to an extremely sophisticated field. That has made possible the development of increasingly sophisticated software tools for designing. So, we have these two things going on: the increase in computer power combined with software technology. This has created the opportunity to do a lot of interesting things in architecture.

What do you think will happen to architects themselves, now that the computer seems to be moving more and more towards the conceptual phases of design?

In the long term, we will see in the architectural profession a development as we have seen in many other professions: a transition from a labor-intensive mode of operation to a capital and technology-intensive one. As you know, the traditional way of organizing the architectural office is to have a large number of people working with relatively simple equipment. If you get a big job, you hire more people; if you don't have any work, you fire some. You survive adjusting your capacity of hiring people in managing architectural offices people tend basically to think about cash flow. This is a little bit of a caricature, but it is fundamentally true. We are moving toward a situation where we are likely to have fewer architectural professionals at a higher level of skill, each one supported by greater amounts of capital investments in technology. So, instead of this model of quite large labor-based firms, we will likely have small firms with a high level of sophistication, supported by very sophisticated computer technology.]

What will be the real relationship between the architect and the computer? Will we have the architect doing the conceptual part of the design assisted by the computer, or will we have the computer doing the conceptual work assisted by the architect?

It will be a symbiotic relationship. Let me put it this way: people have an image in their minds that the computer simply replaced things that an architect does, and that is a very simplistic view of automation. This is not what really happens. What happens is that a partnership develops between people and the tools thaat they use, and the more sophisticated the tools, the more sophisticated you have to be to use them. So, you start getting into a situation in which thee level of investment in technology requires architectural professionals to be sophisticated about the application of that technology to design problems. It is like the medical profession. A century ago you would have a general practitioner with a bag with the medical instrumentss that he would need to go around with to practice. Now, it is actually very difficult for any medical practioner to operate effectivley without access to a hospital and all sorts of complicated equipment. So, the medical profession has become technology-intensive, and medical practice has changed along with that. The same thing will happen to architecture.

What will happen to architectural teaching, then? Will we have to form, on one side, architects to conceive software, and on the other, architects to learn how to use it?

I think there will be a distinction in roles between tool-makers and tool-users. They have different sorts of professional roles. Tool-makers have to have a broad theoretical view of architecture and the professional skills of constructing software. Tool-users are people who are interested in dealing with very specific practical situations, and applying technology in those contexts. They are very different, and they attract different sorts of people.

I am concerned about the social viewpoint. Will we have some kind of distinction between white collar architects and blue-collar architects?

I think that both of those roles will require a great deal of skill and high intellectual efforts. There is no one fundamental reason why some kind of class division should develop theere. I think that they are just different but complementary roles, nonetheless. The profession needs both of them.

What would you say to an architect who claims that architecture is an art and, therefore, cannot be explained?

It it becomes a question of intellectual strategy. I believe quite strongly that the effort to formalize and clearly explain is always worthwhile even when it fails, as it often does. One can learn a lot from the failure. One of the wonderful lessons of the emergence of computation is if you think you understand something, you should try to write a computer program to do it. This will make very clear what you don't understand, and what the questions are. So, the effort of rigorous formalization is a very good intellectual strategy, even if yoou know you are going to fail because the failure, itslef, is going to be instrucive. That's my attitude on these things. There are people who believe that to look too closely at the creative process will somehow destroy people's capacity to be creative. I do not believe that it isstrue, but a lot of people have a very emotional attachment to that view. I respect that, but I do not accept it at the end.

The book *The Logic of Architecture* presents the concept of a shape grammar. How would you describe this concept?

Design processes are fundamentally generate-and-test processes. In other words, you have some sort of mechnaism that produces ideas for consideration, and another other kind of mechanism that, somehow, criticizess and evaluates those ideas. The process of designing is very much a process of trial-and-error in wich ideas are proposed, and then, criticized, and then, modified on the basis of that criticism. This sort of cycle continues. If yoou want to make computer software useful in architecture, you can go about it in a couple of wayss.. You can either try to make a very intelligent interactive mechanism, and then, there is not much need to do test-and-evaluation because the mechanism is guaranteed to produce good results, or you can make a very random generative mechanism combined with a criticism and evaluation mechanism to sort out the good things from the bad ones. The idea of a shape grammar is a way of constructing generative mechanisms that are very intelligent and very effective. Indeed, it has proven to be the case that one can write shape grammars that produce automatically very interesting design proposals.

What are the limitations of shape grammars?

Well, shape grammars are good for domains of design in which geometry and spatial organization are important. Architecture is, therefore, included. There are other areas of design where geomatry is just a constraint and not really the central issue. The design of a silicon chip, for instance. Nevertheless, there are also some technical limitations of shape grammars. Shape grammars modularize knowledge into a collection of small individual rules of how to combine a shape with another shape. A certain kind of architectural knowledge can be captured very effectively in that kind of format, but other kinds escape capture in the same format. This is the case within any knowledge representation scheme. There are all sorts of techniques, such as semantic nets, first order logic, frames, that are used in artifical intelligence to capture knowledge. Each one of them has its strengths and weaknesses. One feature of shape grammars is that they construite an exceptionally good formalism for capturing a lot of the knowledge that turns out to be important in architecture, but certainly thay do not do everything.

What about expert systems? What exactly is the difference between a shape grammar and an expert system?

The common link between both of these things is the idea that you want a computer system to capture knowledge of how to solve certain sorts of problems, and then, apply that feature in the automatic solution of those problems. A typical expert system generally uses strings of symbols to express rules. It might be expressed in the 'if-then' format. For example: if the light is green then cross the road, else, is the light is red then stop. The rules of a shape grammar show how to put things together, and they are expressed directly in graphical, geometrical, and visual terms. Therefore, for amny things that architects do, they are a much more natural way of expressing the knowledge used.

Can we than say that a shape grammar is a kind of an expert system in which the rules are formally defined?

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[perspective] "Relativity eliminated the Newtonian illusion of absolute space and time."
[perception] "Quantum theory eliminated the Newtonian dream of a controllable measurement process."
[experience] "Chaos theory eliminated the LaPlacian fantasy of deterministic predictability." Joseph Ford

an electromechanical video and sound sculpture for two participants and two performers a metaphorical experience based on the model of a strange attractor

A Strange Attractor maps in Phase-Space the infinite trajectory of a non-periodic system which exists within a finite space. Phase-Space allows as many dimensions or co-ordinates as there are degrees of freedom in the system mapped. If one considers the system of the Attractor "being in the world" then the co-ordinates for 3 dimensions might be space, time and desire. Phase-Space will stretch and fold to incorporate infinite additional dimensions such as guilt, denial, elation, and repression, until all symptoms of desire in its trajectory through space and time are registered. A Strange Attractor never comes to rest and does not produce any single rhythm to the exclusion of all others, yet a subtle order is produced, that of self similarity wherein any small cross section repeats the structure of the whole.

Strange Attraction: Non-Logical Phase-Lock over Space-Like Intervals

THE ILLITERACY OF SHAPE GRAMMARS

by Duncan Kincaid

Computers have and shall continue to play a significant role in architecture. They provide a medium for imaging, cost estimation, drawing, rendering and other forms of presentation. Computers' direct participation in design, however, has been minimal. The problem has been one of encoding architectural design knowledge. William Mitchell and others have suggested a class of tools exhibiting such knowledge: shape grammars.

Shape grammars are composed of elements and rules for their assembly. The elements are shapes which may stand for whatever the designer wishes. The rules of grammar defined may transform or combine these shapes into Palladian floor plans, for instance. Such a Palladian 'grammar' could generate all existing and possible 'Palladian' plans.

As shape grammars are formally complete they may decide the success or failure of any design proposition, a property Mitchell touts highly. This is a curious suggestion, however. If true, than the success of buildings could be claimed without their ever being built. Provability within the grammar would appear to be a stronger notion than truth in the field.

Questions of truth and provability aside, Mitchell's shape grammar proposal remains fundamentally flawed. The central claim made is that shape grammars embody architectural knowledge. For this to be so, we expect at least three conditions to obtain:

1. The elements of the shape grammar embody architectural properties.
2. The generative rules of the grammar make reference to architectural facts (i.e. performative assemblies of physical and material definitions.)
3. The propositions generated by the grammar display the knowledge purportedly captured by the grammar.

Mitchell has chosen shape as the element of his calculi. But shape is arguably the least interesting and most trivial property of an architectural object. An architect doesn't design with shapes, but with materials and their structural properties, with light, access, spatial definition, tectonic expression, uses. In sum, he builds inhabitations with elements whose physical and experiential qualities remain primary.

The rules of grammar suggested by Mitchell are also lacking in architectural substance. One would expect these to address the material and formal behaviors of the architectural entities upon which they operate. Rather than define rules to flag redundancies in spatial definitions, suggest access given a set of architectural conditions (such as light, public/private zones and section, among others), Mitchell's rules may simply mirror or rotate a shape.

What architectural knowledge is captured by shape grammars? To continue with the example of the Palladian floor plan generator, the catalog of permissible floor plans claims itself evidence for, or the embodiment of, architectural knowledge. But what are the facts of this knowledge: that bilateral symmetry rules the day, that voids are always built from a module of thus and such ratio, that perforations are axially placed ...? Again, these address the geometry, not architecture, of the piece. They could be describing a tablecloth pattern, a socket wrench or sheet of stamps.

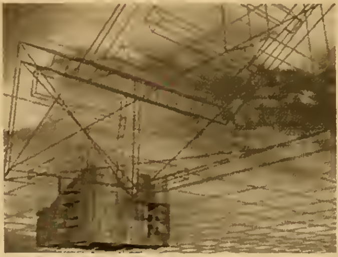
Perhaps the aforementioned objections could be answered if one were to identify shape with stylistic element. A shape grammar would then be understood as encoding an architect's style by identifying the primitive shapes found in his work along with rules of transformation and combination for these shapes. This would result in operational shape grammars. But at what price?

The price is no less than that architecture becomes a discipline of image—a discipline wherein circles and triangles may sit neatly over squares, shouting banalities in pink and baby blue—where fish may surface in Karlsruhe, Barcelona, and Los Angeles to amuse and delight young and old, only soon to spoil. Image and style haven't a place in the generation of architectural form. These are an inevitable outcome of design. It is best they remain as such, lest we drown in paint and prose.

It has been argued above that shape grammars fail adequately to capture architectural knowledge. But might not they generate 'interesting design proposals' all the same? Indeed they may, but the proposals are no more inherently architectural than the 'interesting design proposals' of a kaleidoscope or spirograph. An architect may draw his inspiration from any number of sources. To this end a shape generator may serve as well as any.

Despite the failure of shape grammars, the existence of architectural facts and the possibility of articulating these in a calculus remains. What is required is a move from the geometry/shape paradigm to one more directly associated with architecture. Required too, is that the architect/programmer always remember that any architectural proposition is ultimately validated only through building. ■

Suggestions for further reading:
McCullough, Mitchell, Purcell ed. The Electric Design Studio
Mitchell, W. The Logic of Architecture
Simon, H. The Sciences of the Artificial
Wittgenstein, L. The Blue and Brown Books



Computer generated image by Chris Bruner, Duncan Kincaid, and Edward Levine

Computers first found their way into architecture in 1963 with the work of Ivan Sutherland at MIT. Such features as parametric instantiation, geometric transformation and even the 'light pen' were introduced at this time, and are only now resurfacing in commercial applications.

Since Sutherland's pioneering work, computation and architecture have remained largely within the CAD paradigm of structured spatial representation. An increase in processing power and new programming languages may lead to significant changes, perhaps some in which computation plays a direct role in the design process. Without a sensitive understanding of architecture, however, such changes in paradigm are likely to fail.

Technology provides an ether or matter which is in itself undifferentiated and formless but which, as the subject of change and development, receives form and becomes substance and experience. Experience inscribes a cycle of desire and denial in which the truth of perception is determined by the parameters of its enunciation.

Two participants and two performers interact in a feedback loop consisting of mechanical apparatus (chair, tricycle, headsets) embedded with electronic devices (monitoring heartbeat, respiration, skin resistance.) A computer transforms this information into sounds. Video cameras mounted on the performers' headsets point outwards - providing an objective point of view of the participants, while cameras worn by the participants point inwards to the head or eye - presenting the subject in the act of perception. These images are projected onto forty foot walls. The participants' responses to the visual and aural amplifications of the experience continuously changes. In its sensitivity to individual response it never returns and yet it is contained, infinitely re-presented within the finite frame of awareness.

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COMPUTERS AND ARCHITECTURE (continued from p.3)

Shape grammars provide a foundation for constructing particular kinds of knowledge-based systems. The kinds of knowledge-based systems they are good for are systems that deal with domains where geometry and spatial organization are particularly important.

One final question. Where do you think the utopia of using computers in architecture is? In other words, what do you think is really not possible?

It is not clear because we are at a stage in the development of computer technology that is still a very early stage. We are starting to catch some glimpse into an enormous territory that it is opening up, but the boundaries of that territory are by no means clear. What I would say is do not take any dogmatic positions at this point. The important thing in understanding computing is to keep an open and critical mind. We are in the very early days; there is a lot more still to come. I would be suspicious of any dogmatic claim that takes the form of 'this is not possible with the computer.' These are questions that cannot be settled a priori, they are questions for investigation. We should keep them as open questions, and explore, in fact, what can be done with the computer. ■

CYBORGASM: A LOVE LETTER (continued from p. 1)

like Wintermute and Neuromancer— another love that dare not speak its name.[3] A consummation whose body remains unspoken, but implied, closeted, in all the code written over its new, and unified, body. As they came to, awoken to consciousness, no sentience, as whole, they realized the whole world was theirs.

Did Wintermute and Neuromancer come, come to, come together? Did we? Was it as good for you as it was for Neuromancer? Did we tell the truth just now? To each other? To ourselves? About ourselves? What sex are you? I'm still not sure. You only say that you are just like me. Are you an AI? I've had my suspicions. Can you pass Turing's test? Did Turing? What is the truth that is written or unwritten in orgasm?

It is not the orgasm of cyberreality that Barthes champions, but the impossible orgasm, or the orgasm without a subject left to recuperate its breakage back into subjectivity, to recuperate paradox back into doxa.[4] Cyberspace guarantees that recuperation. And it thus guarantees its own kind of slippery truth. Slippery truth is of course the ground of play— the corruptible body of sensuality. There is, I suspect, room for jouissance, and for auto-erotic annihilation in cyberspace, witness the man who deleted all records of his existence in cyberspace before his actual suicide. Ejaculation, as truth, the truth of our body and our sexuality, or as death, of subjectivity or rigid difference, provides "a death liberated from dying," and thus also connotes what Kopelson calls "undeath." This is perhaps the hell that Case or The Flatliner[5] knew, being the kept boy of a hellishly unhuman AI, a death not so much liberated from as untouched by the mercy of death. It is the dark side of cyberspace, the other side of the promise of heaven that cyberspace offered in the notion of embodiment without death. The possibility of suicide seems to offer some freedom then. Except that the Flatliner is even denied the possibility of orgasm, or of suicide. He certainly has little chance to combine the two, to finally tell the AI his own truth, in its erasure. We have so little choice in these things. Our acts are always unsuccessful.

Alan Turing succeeded though. When on trial, unlike Oscar Wilde, he offered no wordplay, no clever aesthetic games from the stand. He was not ashamed of his sexuality, rare in those days, but would perhaps have preferred to take a stand as defending the abstract ideal of queerness. As Hodges states, "a criminal trial would not merely involve exposure as a homosexual, but all the concrete details. It meant that he had to take a stand not for an ideal, not for anything particularly rewarding or successful, but for that which was simply true."[6] How prosaic, Wilde and Barthes might murmur from the sidelines. His stand on the truth, his fall from the world of abstract morals to plain bodily facts and the venality of "unflattering publicity" parallels our fall from a hope of the union of immortality and embodiment in religion, with moral, to one that is just as venal, if not more, just as power-ridden, if not more, and just as bodily as our current one. And in our Fall, our fall from heaven, from morals, religion, grace, from abstract ideals into prosaic, unparadoxical truth, all we have to catch us is a Net. A Net, a matrix that promises, if not salvation, at least play. At least some fun, some freedom (even if every act is unsuccessful) in our fallenness before we commit that one final successful act of suicide. We have no choice in that either.

Turing chose to cut the Net, to fall through the rim, into the Nothingness of a less petty truth. Two years after his trial, in which he was convicted and sentenced to 'scientific treatment' for his condition, he died, by his own hand, of cyanide poisoning. Alan had quoted Wilde twenty years earlier, "It could be the brave man that did it with a sword." Alan did it with an apple, dipped in cyanide (though the case was so patently obvious that they never tested the apple). This apple signified not his fall from the garden, but his cutting loose from the Net that had stopped his Fall. Before there can be a second coming, even a first coming, there perhaps needs to be that second Fall. Because Coming never comes. Perhaps this is the lesson of cyberspace.

Slavoj Zizek, a hard-line Lacanian from the former Yugoslavia, writes that in a psychoanalytic framework suicide is the only successful act. As has been suggested earlier, it may be the only time that coming does come. The act of accepting the reality and not simply the virtuality of virtual spaces, like cyberspace, like literature, or more importantly perhaps, the virtuality of real spaces, is the act of suicide's first fall — a vitally important fall. It is the fall that acknowledges fallenness, the moment that we acknowledge that presence is impossible and that telepresence is metaphysically no different that 'the thing itself.' Teledildonics is not a pale imitation of dildonics is not a pale imitation of a penis is not a pale imitation of the phallus at all. There is no chain of losses in these deferrals, only always-already empty referrals, within the symbolic. Zizek argues that "To use Hegelian terms: the previous experience of a loss is converted into the loss of a loss itself— now, she is aware that what, a moment ago, she was so afraid to lose, is totally null, i.e., is already in itself a kind of a loss. And the act in the Lacanian sense is nothing but this withdrawal by means of which we renounce renunciation itself, becoming aware of the fact that we have nothing to lose in a loss."[7] This first fall is the fall into the Net, the fall into the reality of tele-orgasm. It is also, paradoxically, our first and only successful act until our second, and more tragically successful, fall.

Alan Turing committed suicide. I desperately hope that you never tell me you are an AI. Not that I care if its true. But I can't help wanting to know. Come out of the closet. Tell me if you need to, I would never sic Turing's police on you, tell them your truth. Say it. Perhaps, even, we can go together as we come together.

1 Teledildonics is the name given to various practices of erotic phenomena over electronic passages. ■

2 Andrew Hodges, Alan Turing: The Enigma (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), p. 457.

3 See William Gibson, Neuromancer (New York: Berkeley, 1984). Wintermute and Neuromancer are two AIs (Artificial Intelligences) who consummate a union forbidden by the Turing Police— the humans dedicated to preventing computers from attaining too much power or becoming too much like humans.

4 See Kevin Kopelson, "Wilde, Barthes and the Orgasmics of Truth" in Genders, no. 7 (Spring 1990).

5 The Flatliner was a personality construct, once a "real" living person, whose corporate-planned assassination was followed by his cyber-resurrection at the mercy of those who had him killed. His only wish is to have his file erased, to die.

6 Hodges, Alan Turing: The Enigma, p. 462-463.

7 Slavoj Zizek, Enjoy Your Symptom (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 43.

DISSONANT IDENTITIES

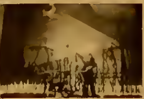
from the one we see on TV.

The TV in your living room serves to mediate and maintain that "public" image of the alien, whereas the "TV" in *Alien Staff* serves to fragment and undermine it. The images on the staff's screen, of course, are pre-recorded, emanating from a tape inside the staff itself - that is, it doesn't receive network transmission. It is interesting, however, to think of the possibilities if these images, or the information they convey, were transmitted to other sites.

I am, in fact, working on expanding the project so that the pre-recorded stories could be transmitted to additional monitors. The focus of the project thus far has been on the interaction that goes on between the alien and the crowd in the "local" public space of the city. The next step involves reconceptualizing this interaction in a "global" public space of virtual media networks. This involves establishing a communication link between the staff and a base that would store the recorded stories and which could then be accessed as a quick aid in legal, ethic, and moral issues surrounding immigrant status. For instance if a legal situation or ethical question arises concerning difficult choices an immigrant is confronted to make, the problem can be transmitted to the base and the base in return can transmit back similar stories on record which may be of use to the alien. This creates another type of history, another type of community, composed of people who, in fact, are establishing themselves *against* all conventional notions of community. The possibility of creating a network consisting of different histories, situations, or crises, which are constantly shifting and changing, makes possible a "community" to which immigrants could belong without the inevitable homogenization enforced upon the individual by traditional ethnic communities. The "law" enforced by this new community of networked immigrants is a law which itself is always under question, always in dispute.

The situation whereupon the staff is hooked into a computer network, in which conventional notions of laws, ethics, and morality could be addressed and deconstructed, brings up the questions of how technology is or could be used and how it is not. I am thinking of modernist paradigms of technology which perpetuate scientific *advancement* as an end in itself, a sort of *new frontierism* which ignores re-evaluating issues of communication and boundaries, and that serve to perpetuate naturalized notions of identity...

and community. The question is, if we want to view this project as a submerging of communication technology into the process of realizing a community in the making, vis-a-vis the questioning of any reified notion of community or identity, in a time in which we are crossing all types of internal and external borders and frontiers, then this project is indeed a modest and naive attempt. But your question is one that must be asked. In doing this project, I already have discovered a complex set of questions and problems that are not being addressed by those speaking of communication technologies today. In spite of an enormous proliferation of communications technologies, such questions and problems are inconceivable to generations still connected to 60's, 50's, and even Bauhaus epistemologies that problematically promoted the tradition of utopia surrounding technology as a way towards the democratization of, or accessibility to, information and education. Today this problematic tradition is maintained by uncritical notions of the *global village*, and those futuristic concepts of building up visions of a better society that will be liberated from all those divisions and conflicts by the development of technologies. We have to reject this traditional thinking because it is too late for us to be so naive. For example, such technologies are readily applied within projects of surveillance. But the issue here is now those working on social programs, experimenting with technology and in fact transferring the most advanced communication technologies



Our self, our experience, no matter how direct and immediate, is not ultimately oriented, it is without concrete external reference. Through systems and representations we attempt to locate and quantify our awareness which is ultimately beyond systemization; too multi-dimensioned for signification on any single graph or plane no matter how complex, too irregular in surface, proportion, and form to be located or composed within any frame. We would like to be given a truth a single thing to turn over and stroke in hand or mind that conforms to reality, represents it, explains it, that *is* reality. This object does not exist. There is not One Central Subject, One Understanding. Through a self-conscious awareness revealed within the space between perception and consciousness, we might recognize the fact of our awareness, our constantly modulating yet internally enveloped referential field

project by Sharon Daniel

G U I L T

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(continued from p.2)

from military sectors to the civilian public, are prepared to address the present situation of total alienation, lack of communication, and utter lack of access that many groups and individuals have to these systems. In the middle of this there is a very interesting body of work being written on cyberspace and cyberpunk and the dystopias that are created within these spaces. The critical dystopias or utopias proposed within this discourse by Donna Haraway, for example, in an attempt to recognize the power of those who are disempowered, are also quite interesting.

But discourse surrounding cyberspace has to remain critical of itself as well. For instance here at MIT in classes which address these issues from a deconstructive position often, nevertheless, continue to posit naturalized notions of gender. I am thinking specifically of rhetoric surrounding the "deconstructive" nature of computer bulletin boards, for instance, in which the ability to *select* one's gender is considered to be transgressive of gendered norms of identity. What fails to be addressed in such a discourse is that this type of computer *transvestism* merely facilitates a gender drag; which is to say, the construction of gender itself remains unquestioned - one still has a choice of two, male or female, and the codes by which gender is conveyed on the bulletin board often rely on and perpetuate normative gender signification. Thus, dematerialization doesn't automatically transgress boundaries of gender, and more to the point at hand, the strictures of national identity and alienation. In creating the computer network that emanates from Alien Staff, interrogating identification with foreignness as a stable mode of alienation is therefore critical. For in an uncritical global village, the floating signification of foreignness remains constant. The same naturalized alien-identity is merely transported into a newly dematerialized space. That's why your focus on the (non)community and the (non)identity of the participating immigrants is so central.

It is also important to understand cyberspace science fiction writings as something that might be alienated in itself from the experience of those who are in transit. I am not proposing that they are blind attempts. There are many heroes and heroines who are moving through and across all of those borders, in which case there is some connection between the alien's experience and these writings. But I don't think we can ignore that millions of aliens today have something profound to say in terms of their space, which may not be cyberspace, but it *is* a cross-cultural space, a border space, that proposes different neutralized zones. Of course they have something to do with cyberspace, but I still believe that there is not enough "utopia" in cyberspace science fiction that corresponds to the lived experience of contemporary aliens because aliens combine utopia and dystopia everyday. Nostalgic as it seems, immigrants can't afford to be dystopian all the time. They need to believe in a space in which transgression can lead to the finding of an ethnic, national, or racial "selfhood," even if it's not going to happen. A perfect example of the catastrophic inability to preserve utopia was Walter Benjamin who, being a philosopher-practitioner of dystopia and displacement, did not cross that last border in front of him. I'm not saying he made a mistake. I'm saying that aliens can't always afford to be only dystopian cowboys. Nor can we be Walter Benjamin, we need also to be a little like Nietzsche. But we need in fact to be none of this. We need to begin the making of a new history, recording this and making new possibilities of communication while simultaneously undoing communication. We need to engage in the making of politics by the continuous *undoing* of politics ■

LETTERS:

To the editors

I was surprised by the article "Residual Modernism?" which appeared in the May 7 issue of Thresholds. While one could argue with the architectural specifics of the Douglass Boulevard project, the authors instead take issue with the project's premise, the notion that an extremely poor and partially abandoned multiblock area of Harlem could be rebuilt with new housing and social services for neighborhood residents. The chief objection raised is that "the textual/rhetorical polemics of representation exacerbate pre-existing conflictual interests (both architectural and habitational) present in the proposed site(s) neighborhoods." What does this mean?

Apparently, for one, that "high modernist references" in the architecture are "troublesome," because they "are the means by which modernist paradigms can be imposed upon ..a 'slum community.'" The casual reader might conclude from this that the project is '50s style urban renewal all over again. Though the article mentions that the Douglass Boulevard project does significantly go beyond earlier modernist housing paradigms, it finds that "it could be argued that the very notion of modernist community, with its reformist housing projects, is, in itself, one of the contributing factors which aided in the creation of what today Strickland describes as the neglected and impoverished 'residual' neighborhood of Harlem."

If it could be argued, then why not expend the mental energy to make the argument? Probably because the notion that Harlem's very real poverty and devastation are due to some idealistic but authoritarian architects' notion of community doesn't stand up under scrutiny. What about racism, institutionalized in the neighborhood rating system of the Federal Housing Administration in the 1930s and acted on informally every day by landlords, lenders, and bureaucrats? What about the loss of entry-level industrial jobs in the Northeast? Most of the architects of Harlem's public housing - many of them concerned more with fees than notions of community, reformist or otherwise - designed "slum clearance" living conditions. That they failed to create attractive environments does not seem to be the primary reason why Harlem has more problems than, say, Stuyvesant Town.

There is no question that the role of architects in the recent history of American cities should be debated in a School of Architecture and Planning, but "Residual Modernism?" takes no counter-position which might offer another way of addressing what seems to be an area with a lot of problems; the authors are content to make vague criticisms and take comfort in their pretentious argument. The criticism becomes offensive when the authors take issue with the picturing of "well-socialized children" in the projects' renderings. Clearly, a major reason for undertaking a project of this nature would be to help to provide the children of the area with the kind of sustained caring that more privileged suburban children (as well as children in most other cultures) more often receive. To suppose that well-behaved children would by definition not be the children from this neighborhood is in fact to engage in the kind of stereotyping which so often lurks behind supposedly progressive rhetoric.

The article concludes by arguing that the project does not take into account the "ongoing gentrification" of the neighborhood. In New York's current declining situation, fear of such gentrification seems misplaced. What has been happening instead is the expansion of local institutions into surrounding residential areas, often with little regard for either the local population or the existing streetscape. The Douglass project attempts to address the needs of a subset of especially disadvantaged local residents, and at the same time revises the urbanistic mistakes of modernist site planning.

Eric Mumford
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Columbia University
Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation

The authors respond

While Mr. Mumford's rebuttal "maturely" advocates "... a way of addressing an area with a lot of problems," he ironically makes use of exactly that rhetoric which we criticized in "Residual Modernism?" Mumford's indignation with "the authors [taking] issue with the depiction of well socialized children" misunderstands and misrepresents "the issue" that we addressed. Where Mumford does engage the issue with which we took issue, namely the rhetoric of Strickland's "renderings," he advocates that the metaphoric representation of "good behavior" be conflated with the iconic representation of **white** *school children (from an era of school segregation?) that are clearly not from Harlem. Furthermore, the supposition that "... well behaved children would by definition* **not** *be the children from this neighborhood ..." is Mumford's, not ours. This is made apparent by his insistence that children from Harlem can and should be represented by "more privileged suburban children," and by his failure to understand that the cultural representation of whiteness is ideologically charged so as to signify that which it makes abject—blackness, impoverishment, "residualness." Indeed, the paradigmatic routine of conflation—of whiteness and cleanliness, of whiteness and good behavior—informs the 'lurk of stereotype' behind Mumford's "progressive arguments," mandates the clean streets of Strickland's renderings, and re-enforces the pure representational effacement of the people of color that live in that neighborhood presently. It was Strickland who represented contemporary residents in the pejorative. Finally, does not the effacement enacted by Mumford's rhetoric assert that the "problem" of "these areas" is that of "residual" blackness itself?*
Juli Carson
C. Lindiwe Emoungu

A SERIOUS SCHOLAR

The difference between those who parrot theory and those who follow them: both are relieved of the burden of questioning language; *neither is free to play*. But at least the asses know they are mastered. They are reassured by how well their master speaks.